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The role of universities in promoting personal development of the participants, through education programs for adults

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Abstract

Adult education is not only a temporary aspect of training, but has become a fundamental principle of active participation of the individual in society, throughout his/her life. The content of most programs for adults includes continuous vocational training, closely related to the dynamics of the economy, targeting the completion of professional training, achieving professional reorientation or adapting to activities using new technologies and calls for technical elements and creativity that have not been provided to the adult through initial training. However, universities should also focus on other specific aspects of adult education, which exceed the limits of professionalism, such as promoting personal development. Thus, training courses will not be limited to providing vocational training in line with the foundation provided by the initial education or increased performance at an occupational level, but will also answer to the needs and interests of different learners regarding personal development, ensuring an increased quality of the act of communication and their participation in social life in general, not only on a professional level.

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1. Introduction

The onset of concerns regarding adult education relates directly to aspects of their professional life. For this reason, adult learning has been talked about for a long time and the design and execution of programs for adults was based predominantly on the need to qualify the workforce in meeting the challenges of industrialization. Although properly initiated, these concerns were focused in the first phase rather on the content, i.e. what to teach adults and

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less on how to train them, i.e. the methodology of working with them. Gradually, attention was imposed in relation to the effectiveness of adult education, bringing into question the attention to specific theories of educational psychology in ages beyond childhood.

Some authors have argued since the 60s the fact that adult learning does not solely depend on age and its peculiarities but also previous training, the practiced profession, social status and the role of the adult, as well as aspects of his private life (Heimlich, & Norland, 1994). Contemporary psychology research refutes the idea that the entry into adulthood would lead to the stagnation of training and education capabilities. Rather, it appears that lifelong learning leads to continuous development. This aspect underlines the fact that the decisive role in adult education belongs to the learning abilities previously performed, the type of learning, the reasons for learning and not age itself. Learning in adulthood should be a way of personal fulfillment, focusing on the individual needs of personal development. Therefore adults should have as much freedom as possible in choosing and organizing learning programs. In designing the training of adult education programs, important aspects that should be taken into account are the characteristics of personal life, the cultural level of their environment, the social and economic activity in which they are trained, conception of self, society and the world, insisting on the diversification of courses, so as to also emphasize the training of adults, not only informing them (Gugel, 2007).

Willingness to actively participate in the events of life makes many adults even become self-taught. Self-directed learning is based on self-responsibility, with the adult deciding whether and how to cope with life's challenges, selecting on his own both the methods and the learning contents (Zemke, & Zemke, 2006). However, involvement in support of adult training of competent institutions, such as universities, is desirable in the present conditions of orientation towards the gradual replacement of the concept of qualification with skills development, more comprehensive and complex, combining the professional side with personal development.

Contemporary society, through the proposed challenges, leads us to challenge ourselves in all areas of life and to grow in our own directions. For many people it is more important to improve professionally, to evolve and to mark successes to highlight them professionally. For others, however, it is just as important or even more important to develop personally, to optimize their relationships with others, to increase civic participation, to identify new ways to overcome their limitations and to successfully cope with the difficulties they may encounter in everyday life. This aspect involves the formation on the components of life that make us more relaxed, self-sufficient, confident and creative, through courses regarding spare time, hobbies and personal passions (Jarvis, 2006).

Statistical research in recent years underlines that there are still a large number of adults who have a lower level of training, which places them in the category of people at high risk of social maladjustment. For example, the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA P9 Eurydice) analyzed in 2011 the degree to which they achieved the main objectives in education and training in the Member States of the EU. According to the data from 2009, the EU has not reached the minimum level of formal adult training, which should ensure success in professional and public integration. This means that about 23 million adults have not completed any formal education beyond primary level, but there are many differences in this respect between European states (EU Council, 2009). By 2020 it is aimed for at least 15% of adults to participate in various forms of permanent education and Romania aligns with these requirements.

As show in the data analysis and statistical interpretation aimed at adult education, major concerns and long-term plans are mainly aimed at adult vocational training, through their participation in initial training courses, continuing training, specialization and training/retraining, which should provide employment opportunities. Fewer institutions and organizations dealing primarily with continuing education and aimed at adults propose the development of existing potential, of intellectual and social-moral skills, personality as a whole, which can increase the adaptability of a person under a highly dynamic environment (Findsen & Formosa, 2011).

Unfortunately, most states only allow the funding of adult education programs focused on the needs of continuous professionalization, not on personal development needs or adaptation to certain life events, other than those related to work. Hence results a class of adults with low motivation for learning, being more compelled by circumstances, by low or by employers to participate in training, having no money to educate themselves according to the wishes and needs of life, wider and more complex (EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2011).

Based on these considerations, the study that we undertook was to identify the extent to which adults in Romania perceive permanent training programs, the degree to which they are able to recognize the need for support in dealing

optimally with the environment and with those around us, in the harmonization of the interests and aspirations of the society. All these aspects would implicitly define the adults' adaptive approaches to various social situational challenges. Therefore, the study of the strategic planning documents of human resources development, at both national and European level, led us to determine if there is a different attitude among adults regarding the individual or social expectations concerning the educational and vocational offer of adults.

2. Research coordinates: purpose, methods, participants, research design, results

The study initially involved setting a goal and some premises of the research, so as to follow a logical approach in obtaining relevant results.

2.1. The purpose and the premises of the research

The purpose of the research was the discovery of the interest rate of adults regarding their professional training in parallel to their personal training, through the courses intended for this age group.

The premises of the research were the following:

- at the level of adults in Romania, there is a fracture between training aimed at professional development and training that supports personal development, the last component being underestimated, mainly because of cultural or financial causes;
- the educational offer of the vocational training providers relates to temporary sequences of the labor market needs, without focusing on long term strategic planning. This leads to the dissatisfaction of adult trainees who are seen frequently in a position to repeat courses that, in part, are similar to some previously covered;
- most adults participate in training because there is a legal obligation to do so. The absence of intrinsic, inner motivation to improve causes low results and less relevant changes in professional practice as a result of the participation in training programs;
- adult education and even youth education, regarding the importance of lifelong learning in order to develop various personal aspects, is poorly performed in school or in the media. Due to a weak or non-existent self-responsibility regarding social life and interpersonal relationships, adults often show dissatisfaction in their personal life, with negative effects at the professional level.

2.2. Methods

As a basic method of research, we used the survey based questionnaire, with the items aiming to highlight the options and desires for training or further training of adults at a professional and personal level. This research instrument consisted of two parts: the first part consisted of a total of four factual questions that have provided data on the occupation, gender, age and completed studies of people surveyed; the second included eight questions with declarative (regarding the factual participation in certain types of courses organized by different institutions) and opinion answers (reported to the reasons for training, assessing the effectiveness of courses, future expectations for training). In essence, the following aspects were:

- the frequency of participation in training in the last 5 years;
- the category which included the courses attended (language courses, IT courses, specialization in a specific field of interest, skill, of personal development or hobby courses);
- the type of institution that organized the courses;
- the reasons for the decision to participate in these courses;
- the knowledge and skills covered during the courses;
- the degree of satisfaction / contentment that the subjects had from participating in the training courses;
- the type of training that the adults interviewed want in the future in relation to their own desires at a professional and personal level;
- the suggestions for the organizers of adult training programs in order to improve these activities.

2.2. Participants

Our research focused on a group of adult participants, selected randomly. We were however interested in the professional membership criterion, taking into account several areas of work, to see if there are differences in the perception of training or professional and personal development.

The initial sample of subjects consisted of 133 people, but because of our interest we selected only 108 of these people, who have participated in training courses in the last 5 years. Among the subjects included in the study, 47 working in education, 29 in healthcare, 11 in commerce, 21 in industry. Regarding the age of the subjects, 43 were less than 35 years old, 33 were aged between 35 and 45, 23 were between 45 and 55 years old and 9 were over 55 years old. Analyzing the level of education of the people surveyed, 66 of them had higher education, 40 - secondary education and 2 had more than 10 classes). The questionnaire was administered to 60 women and 48 men. In the case of the last aspect we tried to verify a possible difference between men and women regarding their interest in training activities in adulthood, given the duties and responsibilities taken in different contexts of life: work, family, society.

2.4. Procedures

The micro research performed assumed a first stage of an ascertaining character that was the application of a questionnaire to 133 subjects. From the data obtained from the questionnaires we developed a second stage, represented by developing a set of suggestions related to adult education, which could form the basis of future training programs, undertaken by universities. These programs should help to balance the two components of adult education: the professional and personal development.

The results obtained could be taken into account in the context of curricular adaptations at secondary and higher education, in order to develop civic responsibility and to ensure a higher quality of future adult lives. At the same time, we support the idea of identifying solutions to motivate and facilitate adult access to personal development programs provided by competent institutions.

2.5. Results

The questionnaire applies to adults in the initial sample of subjects shown above demonstrated the following: during the last 5 years, 23.30% of the adults participated in 3-4 training courses, 57.89% attended 1-2 classes, and 18.79% did not attend any training or development course. Thus, we further analyzed the responses of 108 subjects who responded that they had participated in training in the last five years, wanting to have an insight on the more recent situation regarding attitudes towards training in adulthood. Analyzing the category which includes training courses, 7.40% were language courses, 9.25% IT courses, 45.37% practiced profession specialization courses, 30.55% qualification courses, 6.48 % personal development courses and 0.92% hobby courses. Regarding the reasons for the decision to participate in training courses, 67.32% of respondents felt that it was due to professional obligations, determined by the need to advance to executive positions or meet a certain score on the professional evaluation. The desire for specialization in a field was the reason for 24.07% of the respondents, 32.40% stated that the reason was the need for qualification or professional requalification and 39.81% mentioned a personal desire to improve activities they have not practiced during initial training. Only 12.96% mentioned the desire to develop various aspects of personality as a reason for training, and 0.92% took into account the satisfaction of hobbies.

Concerning the institution that organized the training courses which respondents participated in, 12.96% mentioned state universities in Romania, 31.48% state institutions that are considering professional insertion (eg County Agency for Employment), 6.48% were made through private providers of training and 49.07% through other state institutions in Romania. In the case of assessing the degree of satisfaction with the content and conduct of the training courses followed, 11.11% responded that they were very satisfied, 37.96% were largely satisfied, 34.25% were satisfied to a small extent and 16.66% were not satisfied at all. The reasons why participants in continuous training were not satisfied with the courses attended were illustrated through the following responses: 18.51% indicated that their training focus was on theoretical information reported to the profession, largely already knew,

26.85% felt that practical skills training was accentuated although developed through previous training, 15.74% identified the fact that in the courses attended there was no new information about the world, life, the human personality, etc. or useful skills and competencies for optimal social integration. The remaining respondents (12.03%) considered the fact that in the attended courses they had found new theoretical information reported to the profession, which complemented prior knowledge and they had also acquired new practical skills (25.92%). Only one person felt that the training brought elements of entertainment, recreation or information about enjoyable spare time.

Analyzing the answers of the respondents regarding the type of courses for adults they would follow in the future in relation to their professional and personal wishes or needs, 10.18% responded that they want to follow foreign language training, 16.66% IT courses, 20.37% to follow specialization training, 4.62% wish to follow qualification courses, 43.51% would follow personal development courses, and 5.55% would like to follow hobby classes.

Regarding the correlation of responses to data concerning the professional field we noticed that people who work in education have participated in a large number of training courses in the last 5 years (an average of 3 courses), followed by those in healthcare (2 courses on average), and those in the industry (average of 1 course) and an average below 1 course by commerce workers.

Concerning networking the answers to the subjects age, persons under 35 have attended the most numerous training courses (representing approx. 40% of adults surveyed), followed by those in the age group of 35-45 years old (approx. 31% of adults), by people aged between 45 and 55 years (21%) and those over 45 years showed the lowest number of training (approx. 8%). The highest participation in training courses was shown by persons with higher education (61.11%), followed by those with secondary education (37.03%) and adults with education of up to 8 classes (1.85%).

We were interested in the extent to which adults surveyed attended professional training or personal development courses. Thus we found that most said that they attended professional training courses, either specialization or qualification (77.09%) and 22.91% attended personal development courses, including foreign language-learning courses or IT courses. These responses were consistent with the fact that most of the persons included in the survey participate in training courses mostly due to professional obligations and less due to their own desire for development (manifested only in 13.88% of respondents). Correlating the responses to the gender of the research participants, we found that in terms of training, both women and men had similar participation. Differences arise regarding participation in personal development courses, where women had a greater participation (15.74% of all courses), while men had a participation of only 5.55%.

For a more accurate illustration of the basic aspect that we have pursued in the research conducted, I will present in Table 1 a comparison of attitudes towards personal and professional training of the various categories of persons who formed the sample of subjects interviewed:

Table 1. Comparison between the participation in professional training courses and personal training courses regarding various categories of people

Participation in professional development courses	No 85 of 108	% 77,09	Participation in professional development courses	No 23 of 108	% 22,91
The field of education	36	42.35	The field of education	11	47.82
The field of healthcare	20	23.52	The field of healthcare	9	39.13
The field of commerce	10	11.76	The field of commerce	1	4.34
The field of industry	19	22.35	The field of industry	2	8.69
Higher studies	44	51.76	Higher studies	22	95.65
Secondary studies (high school)	39	45.88	Secondary studies (high school)	1	4.34
8th grade studies	2	2.35	8th grade studies	-	-
25-35 years old	31	36.47	25-35 years old	12	52.17
35-45 years old	26	30.58	35-45 years old	7	30.43
45-55 years old	19	22.35	45-55 years old	4	17.39

Over 55 years old	9	10.59	Over 55 years old	-	-
Women	43	50.58	Women	17	73.91
Men	42	49.41	Men	6	26.08

From the analysis of the questionnaire data, a reluctant participation in personal development courses is clearly shown compared to professional development courses. This aspect leads us to consider that there is a tendency to separate the two issues, professional and personal development, both by adults following a type of training, as well as by those who provide training courses. This separation leads to the erroneous idea that the elements of personal development only help us in personal life, family, society, and the elements of professional training only help us professionally, with the two segments of the training not influencing each other. At the same time, the labor market, more and more competitive, leads adults to focus more on their professional training, often neglecting personal aspects of life, including personal development.

3. Conclusions

By harnessing results obtained following the data analysis of the questionnaire, we proposed the development of suggestions to help balance the two components of adult education: the professional and personal development, given the role that universities could play in their capitalization. Among these are:

- ensuring a higher mobility in education and training by increasing the supply of training courses for adults;
- in Romania, as well as in other European countries, we should invest more in training that meets the needs and personal interests of adults, relative to the innovations and discoveries in science, which ensures an increased quality of the participation in social life in general, not only professional life;
- further involvement of universities in training, with modern visions, oriented towards elements of further development of different scientific areas, based on prospective studies. Private institutions, or even state institutions, which provide much of the training are focused only on the present needs of the labor market, without establishing a long-term correlation with the evolution of society;
- popularization among adults, even during higher education, of the idea that personal development is just as significant as professional development, supporting each other. Because of this reason both categories of continuous training are equally necessary;
- emphasizing the fact that the development of individual adaptability to the peculiarities of contemporary social or professional development is achieved through both personal development as well as through participation to social development;
- inclusion in the list of concerns for adult education of hobby courses to ensure elements of a pleasant relaxation and spending spare time with pleasure, in line with each adult's passions. Although this goal is more difficult to achieve considering the financial and economic conditions in Romania, a more open attitude should be manifested regarding this, just as in other European countries, which have a greater generosity of the types of education offered at adulthood.

As a result of the information obtained from this study, we can provide some suggestions for the trainers involved in organizing courses for adults:

- more explicit presentation of the benefits of personal development courses alongside those of professional training at the time of exposing the adult formation offers;
- Providing a significant number of credits after completing the personal development courses (in areas that regularly require a certain number of credits through continuous training - eg education), which would encourage adult participation to this type of courses , alongside those of professional training;
- For all areas (including those that do not operate with credits) it is recommended to facilitate access to professional promotion or filling certain functions and the fulfillment of social roles according to the type of competences acquired through personal development courses;
- attracting adults towards training aimed at personal development elements through attractive ways of practice and involvement of competent and experienced trainers in adult education.

When the training programs take into account adult expectations, both in terms of content as well as the specific modality of training or education, the results will be superior. Adult educators must consider the fact that they already have some training, but also a life experience that may be useful in the development of ongoing development programs, without duplicating what is previously known (Kappe, Smits, & Bekker, 2011). The quality of the results of organized training experiences through which adults are put through should be assessed by reporting to their actual personal need of continuously educating themselves. The essential role of adult training courses is to focus on the principles of stimulating, motivating, relevant and effective teaching with a concrete impact in professional and personal life.

The essential role of adult training courses is to focus on the principles of stimulating, motivating, relevant and effective learning and of tangible impact in both the professional life as well as the personal life (Choi & Jacobs, 2011). Even if some of these courses can not be defined as learning activities because they can not be correlated with formal training or the educational system, they must still be recognized as forming activities, with a particularly relevant role for the adult that continuously adapts to changes in all aspects of life.

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